It was wise old Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, who said, “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts”. This adage feels particularly relevant when discussing our health. Keeping all the different systems of the body in good working order adds up to a better quality of life. You are more able to stay active, participate in social gatherings, focus at work—attributes that would be limited were you not taking care of the one and only body you’ll ever have.

Aristotle’s words apply to the family as a whole, too. If one member of your family has an autism spectrum disorder, or Crohn’s disease, or a broken leg, everyone suffers. Other children lose a playmate, parents neglect their own health to focus on that of their ailing child, everyone misses out on birthday parties, trips to the park, and other activities. As parents, we are only as happy as our unhappiest child. Aristotle didn’t say that, but whoever did was just as wise.

For this reason (and so many others), it is essential to establish and maintain healthy habits that allow every member of your family to function at his or her peak, regardless of where that zenith is, or what it looks like. This means ensuring adequate nutrition, encouraging exercise, limiting toxic exposures, and reinforcing such behaviors to your kids early and often.

KNOW YOUR NUTRITIONAL STATUS

What we eat is as important as what we don’t—meaning, you may try to incorporate as many vegetables, whole grains, and organic foods into your diet as possible, and yet if you are a vegetarian you may become deficient in iron, or vitamin B12. The first step to avoiding a vitamin or mineral deficiency is getting tested by your internist to see where you stand. Knowing your current levels and discussing any red flags with your doctor can help nip a problem in the bud.

It is imperative to discuss with a medical professional any and all supplements you are taking or plan to take, and anything you give to your kids—whether it’s vitamin C to ward off a cold, a standard multivitamin, or something less common. These products stand to improve health enormously, but need to be safely administered, especially to children taking medications for ASD-related learning disabilities, or other conditions.

Also, know what a vitamin deficiency looks like, and who is at risk. Children on the autism spectrum are prone to digestive problems that may make it difficult for their bodies to properly absorb the nutrients they need. Ditto aging
family members: older adults are at risk of developing age-related digestive symptoms like constipation, ulcers, and gastrointestinal reflux disease.

Knowing what the body needs to thrive and identifying deficiencies is just one step toward achieving whole body health for your entire family. And as ever, real, wholesome, organic food is the best source out there for the nutrients our bodies crave. Seek out iron in lentils and Swiss chard; B vitamins in avocados, mushrooms, beans, beets and spinach; fatty acids in nuts, seeds, and seed oils like pumpkin and sunflower; and potassium, magnesium and calcium in bananas, broccoli, kale and bok choy. Additionally, blueberries, blackberries, and raspberries are loaded with phytonutrients, which help prevent disease and keep your body in good working order.

If your child is on the autism spectrum, odds are you’re no stranger to gastrointestinal problems: children with ASD are around three-and-a-half times more likely to suffer chronic diarrhea and constipation than their normally developing peers, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Probiotic supplements can help boost your entire family’s immunity, while simultaneously infusing much-needed good bacteria into their guts. Fermented foods like miso, sauerkraut, kimchi (a Korean cabbage), and the increasingly popular strained Greek yogurt are all probiotic powerhouses.

THE SUNSHINE VITAMIN

While it might seem like just another letter in the vitamin alphabet, getting enough vitamin D has been linked to a reduced risk of developing multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, cancer, and heart disease, to name just a few. It is an immune system regulator, protecting us from the common cold and reducing the inflammation that so often leads to disease. Vitamin D has also been shown to reduce the severity and frequency of asthma symptoms, and may play a key role in maintaining cognitive function as we age.

The Vitamin D Council, a nonprofit working to educate the public on vitamin D, notes that you just can’t get the amount of vitamin D you need from food. They advocate obtaining vitamin D by safely exposing your bare skin to sunlight for about 15 minutes if you’re
fair-skinned, and a bit longer if you are dark-skinned. They also strongly recommend a supplement for everyone, including infants. Discuss proper dosage with your doctor. When deciding what brand of vitamin to take, opt for whole food based vitamins, rather than synthetic ones, so that your body is better able to recognize and properly metabolize the nutrients.

GET MOVING
Another enormous part of keeping your whole body humming along is using it for its intended purpose—to move! There are few healthcare professionals, if any, who would argue against the many benefits of exercise for kids, their parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents.

For children on the autism spectrum, vigorous exercise has been shown to decrease self-stimulatory behaviors, hyperactivity, aggression, self-injury, and destructiveness, according to the Autism Research Institute. It can reduce symptoms of depression, stress, and anxiety, and improve sleep, reaction time, and memory for anyone.

TOXIC THREATS
Another major, often overlooked aggravator of illness is exposure to toxins. Encountering a noxious substance can be obvious, like when cleaning products laden with chemicals give you a headache, or make you cough and gag. For this reason, and so many others (as I’ve written about extensively in *Autism File* and elsewhere), it is imperative to use non-toxic cleaning agents derived from natural sources like plants and essential oils.

**Red Flags for Vitamin Deficiency**
Indications of a vitamin deficiency vary depending on the culprit, but Dr. Susan Blum, author of *The Immune System Recovery Plan* (Scribner, 2013) offered the following so-called “weird” warning signs to *Details* magazine:

- **Cracks at the corners of your mouth** could imply a shortage of iron, zinc, or B vitamins in your body
- **A red, scaly rash on your face or hair loss** may signal a lack of biotin, or vitamin B7
- **Red or white acne-like bumps** on the cheeks, arms, thighs or butt might mean your body lacks essential fatty acids, or vitamins A and D (nearly half of Americans are vitamin D deficient, according to a 2011 study)
- **Numbness, tingling, or prickling** in the hands, feet or elsewhere is sometimes a sign of a B vitamin deficiency: namely B9 (folate), B6 or B12
- **Muscle cramps** in the toes, calves, arches of feet or backs of legs could indicate insufficient magnesium, calcium or potassium consumption
Less apparent are the hazards you cannot smell, taste, or visually detect. Unfortunately, such contaminants are often present in the one element we should hold holy above all others, if for no other reason than human life literally cannot exist without it: water.

Studies have detected everything from arsenic and lead to prescription drugs and rocket fuel in the water supplies of major cities in the United States. You may think drinking bottled water solves you from this problem, but in 2009, almost 50 percent of all bottled water came from municipal tap water supplies, according to Food and Water Watch, a public interest group working to ensure the food, water and fish we consume is safe, accessible and sustainably produced.

Even if your water contains trace amounts of toxins, repeated consumption or usage (to shower, brush teeth, water the lawn) can build in the body. Long-term, low level exposure to toxic substances can have different effects on the human body than a single, short-term exposure; in some cases, as with pharmaceuticals in the water, such potential consequences remain unknown.

Investing in a good filtration system for your home will help rid or limit the amount of contaminants in your family’s water supply, whether it comes from a private well or public source. The Environmental Working Group has on its website a very useful search engine for finding the most useful water filter for your needs—from simple, cheap carbon filters to those that remove specific contaminants. Check it out at www.EWG.org.

### CLEAN UP YOUR ACT

Another key piece of the whole body health puzzle is preventing viruses and infections from entering your household. Whether it’s a stomach bug, the flu, sinusitis, or something else, kids are germ machines, likely to give and receive innumerable illnesses every year.

Your first and best line of defense against sickness is keeping everybody’s hands clean. The CDC recommends thinking of hand-washing as a five-step process: wet, lather, scrub, rinse, dry. Use clean, running water (warm or cold will do), and make sure to lather the entire hand, including the backs, between the fingers, and under the nail. It is essential, the CDC says, to scrub for at least 20 seconds (they recommend singing the “Happy Birthday” song to yourself, twice). Dry with a clean towel, or air dry. To read more about the importance of clean hands, go to www.cdc.gov/handwashing.

Hand sanitizers are often touted as a means to prevent the spread of such conditions, but be wary of their toxicity. Popular chemical antibacterial sanitizers and soaps often contain triclosan, an ingredient that has been linked to liver toxicity, altered hormone regulation, and muscle weakness. They also commonly contain alcohol, which can cause babies and toddlers to behave strangely due to alcohol consumption, resulting in a trip to the emergency room. Additionally, the American Medical Association notes that triclosan may encourage bacterial resistance to antibiotics.

Avoid antibacterial hand sanitizers that contain synthetic chemicals like triclosan or synthetic fragrances. Instead, look for products that use natural antibacterial ingredients made from organic pure therapeutic grade essential oils like lemon, clove, cinnamon, rosemary and eucalyptus oil to name a few. Check out Dr. Young’s Thieves Waterless Hand Purifier and Essential Oils. (www.youngliving.com/en_US/products/home/natural-protection/thieves-waterless-hand-purifier)

The human body is a complicated place to live. Taking care of it for the long haul, and encouraging your entire family to do the same, can be simple, as long as you’re equipped with the right tools and accurate information. The sum of all this knowledge will make your whole body and your whole family greater than you could ever imagine.

### Children on the autism spectrum are prone to digestive problems that may make it difficult for their bodies to properly absorb the nutrients they need.

**Note:** Information provided herein is not intended to treat or diagnose any health conditions. As always, consult your healthcare provider with any questions or health concerns.